# Ghana-*da*'s *Duck*, or a Translator's Travails

Amlan Das Gupta

**Abstract**

*The paper arises out of my experience of attempting to translate some of Premendra Mitra's celebrated stories about Ghanashyam Das, better known as Ghana-da, a teller of exciting and fantastic stories to a group of young and often critical house-mates. Written between the mid-1940s and the mid-1980s, the stories were extremely popular, and drew a readership that cut across age and gender. The paper seeks to consider Mitra's masterly command of fact, in particular scientific and geographical knowledge, and the way that this is integrated in fictional narrative structures that are often exotic and hyperbolic. I attempt to raise questions that relate to the pedagogic intentions of Bengali juvenile fiction, and the questions of audience expectation and response.*

I propose in this brief essay to discuss a short story by Premendra Mitra called *Duck* (*Haansh*). It is one of the stories that Mitra wrote about his fictional raconteur, Ghana-*da*, who lives in a boarding house somewhere in Kolkata and is occasionally persuaded by his younger housemates to tell them stories about his adventures. As the unnamed narrator of the Ghana-*da* stories tells us in the first story of the series, "We've accepted that there's no place in the world that he hasn't been to in the last two hundred years and no event that he hasn't had something to do with." A few years ago I tried my hand at translating some of these stories and the results appeared in a volume entitled *Mosquito and Other Stories*, published by Penguin in 2004. I understand that recently the stories have been reissued in the Penguin Modern Classics series.

For those unfamiliar with the stories, the first of the Ghana-*da* stories appeared in 1945, in a Puja annual collection named

*Alpana*. The story was *Mosha* (*Mosquito*), which initiated the legend of Ghana-*da* and the boarding house – the *mess-bari* – at 72 Banamali Naskar Lane. The familiar setting took some time to develop though: in the earliest stories, the address is not mentioned, and we hear of the other residents. Within a few years, however, the house and its dwellers had become firmly established: in the stories themselves as well as in the world of Bengali fiction. The main speaker is Ghana-*da* himself, and his audience is made up of four young men who oscillate between amused contempt and reluctant admiration for the raconteur.

At the time when these stories started to appear, Premendra Mitra – poet, novelist, essayist, short-story writer and filmmaker – was already a major figure in the cultural life of Bengal. Born in 1904, he was already established as a writer of note when his early novel *Pank* was serialized between 1925 and 1926. Though written for young people, the Ghana-*da* stories were popular with all kinds of readers from the beginning. Their combination of science, travel, adventure and imagination made them unique in Bengali fiction. They are thought of as fantasies, but fantasy is a dangerous word to use about the Ghana-*da* stories. In spite of Ghana-*da* becoming synonymous with tall tales, there is little in the stories that does not either stand up to the light of reason and fact, or draw on sharply topical interests. My interest in the present story – *Haansh* – is essentially for this reason.

If I could be permitted a personal confession, I should admit that I was as dubious as most of my friends about the success of this venture. The stories were, I feared, too fantastic, too outrageous in their flights of imagination, to withstand transference into another language, and at that a language whose idioms and habits of thought were so alien. One of the major problems of translating childhood favourites, I think, is that of *affect*: the result of one's labours seem all the more poor because of a particular function of memory, the difficulty of having to dissociate such works from a web of emotion and excitement experienced in the past. *Pace* Benjamin, I hasten to say that what I am saying is not a restriction upon the act of

translation in itself, or even a denial that the translation can stem only out of the afterlife of the work, but to try to understand a problem of choice: the need one feels to translate works in a language in which one normally thinks and feels into one which will make it available to a different set of readers. It is also important to assert that the intended reader of the translation is not one who has access to the source, and so presumably she will not be troubled by the translator's hesitations. Inasmuch as the afterlife of a work may also be an afterlife of affect, in which the desire to translate has to contend with the sense of deeper cultural mooring, the project becomes more difficult than anticipated.

Translating Ghana-*da* was instructive in a number of respects. For one, the process of rendering the stories into English was smoother than I had anticipated, or at any rate, intermittently so; for if trying to convey the peculiar character of boarding house life in post-war Kolkata had its inevitable problems, the substance of Ghana-*da*'s own narrations were decidedly simpler. It might be easier to explain this with a brief examination of one of the stories, and *Haansh* is as good an example as any other. In fact what I am trying to convey is a general feature of the stories in general. *Duck* begins with a new resident in the boarding house, Bapi Dutta, clearly a misfit in the close community. He is crude and insensitive, and clearly lacking in the reluctant appreciation of Ghana-*da*'s talents that the inner group of residents share. It is a Friday night and a great meal is in progress, to satisfy those members of the mess – like Bapi Dutta – who go home for the weekends. The main course is duck curry, and Bapi speaks knowledgeably about the excellence of the fowls they are savouring. It soon transpires, however, that the ducks that figure on the table are actually the very ones that Bapi had bought to take home – and it was at Ghana-*da*'s orders that the ducks had been cut up and cooked. Bapi, like the great oaf that he is, goes charging up to Ghana-*da*'s room to confront him, but instead of denying the charge Ghana-*da* simply says that this makes 1232 ducks that he has cut up; at which Bapi, confused, but still angry, demands a further explanation.

The story that Ghana-*da* reluctantly is made to tell, is one which is thrilling and fantastic. It starts with Ghana-*da* crossing the high Himalayan snowline in the dead of winter on one of his customary adventures. The locale here is in part one of the current routes to Mansarovar and Mt Kailas: past the checkpost at Lipulekh to Taklakot, and thence, as Ghana-*da* nonchalantly describes it, a casual stroll over the Gurla pass towards the frozen snowfields leading to Kailas. Ghana-*da* reels off the local names of Himalayan fauna, and while the regulars try to turn their chuckles into coughs Bapi is entirely under the spell of the tale. Briefly then, Ghana-*da* describes how he is stuck in a raging blizzard, when he hears a voice calling out to him in Finnish (which is one of the innumerable languages that the narrator knows well) and then in French and English. The ghostly voice leads to the discovery of the body of Dr Callio, a well known explorer and scientist, known to have perished in these parts. The ghostly voice still calls out, and Ghana-*da* sadly meditates on the sad fate of the scholar.

The story suddenly shifts to the camp of von Bruhl, apparently an adventurer, some fifty miles away from Gurla Pass, where a dokpa – and Ghana-*da* rather condescendingly explains that the word locally means ‘shepherd’ – arrives in a half-dead state. After recovering, he finds employment with von Bruhl. He claims to know the region very well, having accompanied the great traveller Sven Hedin in his explorations of the region. Von Bruhl appears suspicious, but keeps the man on. Soon however the new recruit is discovered spying in von Bruhl's tent, and there is a struggle in which the German goes flying into the tent. Not surprisingly, the dokpa turns out to be Ghana-*da* in disguise, and he tells von Bruhl that he too is looking for some ‘water’. Further recognitions ensue: von Bruhl is none but the arch villain Muller, who in turn recognizes in the dokpa his old adversary Ghanashyam Das. Dr Callio was scouring the region for a lake of ‘heavy’ water – otherwise known as deuterium – used in nuclear research. A natural source apart from revolutionizing science would naturally be a source of immense wealth. Muller had befriended the scientist, stolen his map and left him to die. Ghana-*da* manages to escape with the map hotly pursued

by the recovered Muller. Ghana-*da*'s gun has only one bullet and after a long journey, when he is about to drop down, he finds a way of saving the map. He manages ingeniously to seize a duck – by shooting a wolf with his single bullet the moment it seized the duck – and inserting the map in a small container into its gullet. The bird flies off to the warmer climes of India. Muller catches up with Ghana-*da* – now unarmed – but the latter saves himself by throwing the carcass of the wolf at Muller, who tumbles into a glacier to meet a fitting death. Ever since Ghana-*da* has been seizing every duck he can find and trying to locate the map.

That leaves unexplained the ghostly voice. When Bapi Dutta, now entirely converted into fawning admiration, mentions the providential appearance of Dr Callio's ghost, Ghana-*da* explains that it was just a tape recording mechanism that Dr Callio had devised before dying to keep his voice playing for some more time. The story ends with the narrator describing Bapi Dutta's conversion into disciplehood, and to the fact that they're *sick* of eating duck.

It is no wonder that this heady combination of Himalayan adventure, science fiction and international skulduggery would have exercised a mesmerising attraction on readers young and old. But above all there was the brilliance and wit of the narrative itself, which turned apparently disparate elements into a gripping whole. The extravagance of the stories with their international settings – the locales vary from the South Pole to the Sahara Desert – are complemented by the reclusive and slightly absurd figure of the teller, living in his little attic on the third storey, consuming in vast quantities the delicacies offered by the roadside eateries of the city, and smoking borrowed cigarettes. But Ghana-*da* outfoxes everybody, including the readers: even as the narrator's young interlocutors try to catch him out by laying traps, it seems that Ghana-*da* is one step ahead of them, revealing unexpected reserves of knowledge and pragmatic intelligence.

The unexpected facility that I found in translating these stories resulted I think from the fact that they are in an important

sense mimetic, incorporating at a fundamental level a wide and highly researched wealth of fact. The Ghana-*da* stories were an important factor in the reading habits of the young until the mid 70s or even early 80s, and in them one picked up a wealth of arcane lore ranging from the reproductive habits of slugworms to black holes. The apparent inconsequentiality of this realm of fact, its lack of any overt pedagogic intent, and its steadfast avoidance of any moral posturing, was what must have appealed to me as a young reader, and to many others for three generations. Fact, I found, translates well even in fantasy and fiction: and if there was one characteristic of the Ghana-*da* stories, it was the reliability of their sources. Looking back now one realises exactly how up to date the stories were. The famous *Hat* (*Tupi*) was written apparently in the few months that elapsed between the abortive Swiss attempt to climb Mt Everest in late 1952 and the success of Hillary and Tenzing in the summer of 1953. In the story the Swiss have come back, but the mountain is still unclimbed. The story displays an amazing wealth of detail about routes and terrain, information that was still very new to the mountaineering fraternity. Mitra must have closely studied the despatches in the international press, not to speak of more specialized journals. But the stories wear their learning lightly and with grace: if rendering the facts of the matter are relatively simple, the same cannot be claimed of the style and narrative structure.

Translations as we know age faster than their originals, and it may well be – and we certainly hope this will be the case – that Mitra will find better interpreters in the future. But I guess that a future translator of the stories will find that the task is both easier and more difficult than one might initially think. In some sense, I guess, the stories incorporate a level of translation in themselves, in that the facts that they so masterfully conceal in their elegant fancy are themselves culled from a variety of sources. The skill of the writer was in making them so much a part of the process of growing up in Bengal for many decades. Of course, the stories did much more than merely render fact palatable and enjoyable. Mitra, as many people know, was himself a deeply committed writer, and thought that true writing came from the recognition of "the

enormous responsibility of living". So if Mitra avoided didacticism and moral posturing, which many of his contemporaries were not able to do, he also made us aware of certain kinds of ethical choices and positions. Such choices may be less popular today, in an age of aggressive global capitalism and systematic destruction of natural resources. Perhaps thus even a translation has some role to play in trying to recover a voice of sanity and reason.